

Ambulance fee referendum rejected in Montgomery County

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In a year marked by tight budgets and tough votes in Montgomery County, voters on Tuesday were enlisted to sort through a sticky series of claims and counterclaims on a question that might not previously have been at the forefront of their busy lives: Should there be a fee for ambulance service?

Their answer: an emphatic no.

Hundreds of career firefighters and paramedics have been stumping for the fee, door to door, at malls - and on Tuesday, at polling places. Meanwhile, volunteer fire and rescue personnel worked phones, neighborhoods and polls seeking to block it.

The Montgomery County Council passed the fee in the spring. It had long been a priority of County Executive Isiah Leggett (D), who argued that the fee was a reasonable way to raise money to expand fire and rescue services. Bills of about \$400 to \$800 would be sent to county residents' insurance companies or the federal government.

"It's a resounding rejection by voters, despite an unprecedented campaign utilizing a huge amount of county resources and personnel," said council member Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg-Rockville), a longtime foe of the fee.

The fight over the fee was intense on both sides of the issue Tuesday.

"We're all about doing our share, but we pay enough taxes," said Lynn Stewart, a real estate agent from Montgomery's Kenwood area, who teamed up with her husband to cast two votes in favor of the fee. "So we thought, let the insurance companies pick up a little bit of the tab."

Some voters said they struggled to interpret mixed messages they received from those in uniform in the frenzied final days of the campaign. "It's not like they are all on the same side of the issue," said Emily Dickey of Bethesda. "It didn't make it any easier to decide what was right."

On a Halloween night excursion to Glen Echo, Dickey came upon a group of firefighters, fire truck and all, handing out fliers in support of the fee. "That's a good station there, good people," Dickey said. But she also received a call and pamphlet from volunteers at the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Rescue Squad. She eventually was "swayed pretty heavily" by the volunteers, and voted against the fee.

Voters also cast ballots Tuesday in the race between Leggett and Republican challenger Douglas E. Rosenfeld, as well as in nine county council races. Leggett and the other Democratic candidates had commanding leads late Tuesday.

At a Democratic celebration at the Rockville Hilton, the crowd was never hushed. There was little reason to be nervous. Campaign workers checked results on iPads, the wine flowed - and so did the bravado about the party's dominance in the county's electoral politics.

The ambulance fee referendum, though, was different. It added competitiveness and a surprising passion to an election season that had left some underwhelmed. Turnout in the September primaries was minuscule, in part because key Democratic incumbents such as Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski had no credible primary opponents. Leggett had no primary challenger at all, leaving Montgomery without a marquee countywide contest to rev up voters heading into the general election.

But then, with its unpredictable and dramatic moments, the ambulance-fee dispute jumped to a place of prominence. Once a divided county council passed the fee in May, opponents gathered tens of thousands of signatures to put the issue before voters. But a Montgomery Circuit Court judge threw out their referendum petition, saying there were problems with the way thousands of voters had signed their names. Fee opponents appealed to Maryland's highest court and won.

The dispute came as a budget crunch in the wealthy county had already forced officials and residents to readjust their expectations of what government can and should do. In the spring, officials shrank the county budget for the first time in more than 40 years.

Montgomery's history of generous government spending - on everything from public schools, human services and employee salaries and benefits - ran into a wall of sagging revenue, an aftereffect of the national recession.

The \$14 million that officials say the fee would generate represents a tiny fraction of the county's \$4.27 billion budget. But both sides portrayed the impacts as potentially grave. Volunteers warned that their operations could be undercut and that dangerously ill residents, worried about costs, could be discouraged from calling 911.

The Leggett administration chose to propose reducing ambulance service and laying off dozens of firefighters if the referendum failed. That could mean "increased risk for our families and properties," according to a widely distributed county flier that a Montgomery judge said was intended to intimidate voters into supporting the fee.

The dispute also brought to the surface some of the contentious undercurrents of county politics.

The long-running feud between career and volunteer firefighters - two committed and proud groups who share the same stations in the county's mixed fire and rescue system - flared with a new intensity over the fee.

In Gaithersburg, heated words turned physical Sunday when a countywide campaign to hang yellow pro-fee banners devolved into a standoff between a volunteer leader and a career ladder truck driver.

The driver hung a pro-fee banner on the front of the truck with a light so passersby could see a message that had also been affixed to county libraries and community centers:
"Vote FOR Question A. Support Your Police, Fire Fighters & Paramedics."

The volunteer maneuvered his sport-utility vehicle to block the view, and at one point grabbed and pushed the ladder truck driver while trying to tear down the sign, the driver said. Police arrived to quell tensions, though no charges were filed.